Moebius

Volume 8
Issue 1 *Campus Controversy*

Article 18

1-1-2010

Interview with Rob Rutherford

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Rob Rutherford is the sheep specialist for Cal Poly's Animal Science Department. He received his bachelor's degree in agricultural education and his standard secondary teaching credential from the University of California at Davis, and a master's degree in general agriculture from Cal Poly. He is a certified educator for Holistic Management.

Moebius: You conclude your article "Sustainability and Agriculture" with, "The Pathway to sustainability is not a matter of intelligence or availability of technology. It is a matter of making better decisions which will lead to a quality of life we desire, for as far into the future as we can imagine" (61). What pathway to sustainability in agriculture is Cal Poly on now?

RR: The more knowledge I gain about sustainability, the less I feel I know because we must decide together what it is that we are trying to sustain. We cannot think of sustainability as enduring cities or towns but instead entire living communities and civilizations. Jared Diamond explains in his book Collapse how civilizations have failed in the past by outlining one consistent element: bad decision making. We need to ask ourselves what we will say when we pave over the last agricultural land in California just as Diamond asks what the people living on Easter Island said when they cut down the last tree. Then, we may begin to see how better thoughts come with time and consideration of a bigger picture.

The idea of recycling is nice—reduce, reuse, recycle—but it is not enough. The dynamic system of all living organisms must keep our ecosystem functioning. A highly resilient community is less likely to cross a threshold into an entirely new and potentially inhospitable environment. The Holling Model is a visual example of how a system reaches its threshold. As any living community moves from the "r" quadrant to the "K" quadrant, we see increasing consolidation of assets and followed to its natural progression—leads to collapse. Huge monocultures of crops are examples of living communities in the "K" state of the adaptive cycle, and therefore are getting dangerously close to the threshold of collapse. On this campus we need to support one model, a model that embraces all knowledge and disciplines in maintaining a place within the "K" quadrant, or we risk losing a solid resilience. The earth cannot be managed with a set recipe. Cal Poly students need to be prepared to get people ready for the time we reach our own threshold.

Moebius: In your experience what is the most effective approach to teaching sustainable agriculture practices?

RR: Most students realize what they learned about sustainability five or so years after they were exposed to it the first time. Cal Poly is associated with conventional-livestock agriculture (agriculture that takes advantage of all technologies), and many of our students will go into that field or have come from it. In the past I have had students who dreaded taking my Holistic Management class because they were not sure what it would be about, but their fears didn't last once they realized how valuable the information is.

The students who have experience with agriculture before coming to college usually catch on to the material very fast, but less life experience in the field usually makes certain information less impactful and the breadth of it overwhelming. I find they really get it when they start to internalize it; therefore, I try to help them achieve a holistic view of the world because singular vision will only create more specialists who don't focus on the whole. It all comes back to better decision making. In these times of extreme "tribalism," Cal Poly students must be able to embrace the whole of what they are managing if they hope to sustain our agriculture systems, rather than fall into prescribed sound bites of various tribes.

Moebius: How has your approach in the classroom changed since you began teaching?

RR: I went to a five-day course on holistic management taught by Allen Savory. The focus was on the positive relationships between land and animals—I work with sheep using low stress herding tactics—so I took copious notes. Three months later I went to another five-day course featuring Allen Savory, and I took notes. When I got home, I compared my notes, and I realized I wrote the same things both times. I realized that I could only hear what I was ready to hear and that made me realize that my students need to be ready to learn before I can make any change in their knowledge.

In the early nineties, Cal Poly faced severe budget cuts: ET (Engineering Technology) and Home Economics were cut as departments, and within the College of Agriculture, 30 percent of the cuts came from the Animal Science Department. The emergency made me realize I needed to recreate my role at Cal Poly. No more retelling of old practices, this time the change in my approach would be about learning to grow with the times and to rethink how animal agriculture needed to fit in the greater community.

Moebius: How do you feel about not teaching Issues in Animal Agriculture this spring?

I am fine with how things have changed. Perhaps my courses that might expose different ways of doing things could be perceived as a threat to a classic model, but I feel it the student's right to see the bigger picture.

The class was intended to cause students to question previously learned materials. Most of the current students are into vet science rather than the traditional production-oriented individuals of past years; therefore, the perceived issues have changed over the years. Recently, I have been having a hard time finding speakers who would be willing, or have the information, to shock students. Cal Poly's students have changed. Many of them arrive questioning the need for widely adopted management practices of modern animal agriculture. I think it is good to take some time to figure out how to change the course to fit their needs today.

In my Holistic Management course, the emphasis is on making decisions leading to a sustainable civilization. We do not discuss issues as problems or solutions; rather, we develop a process of decision testing questions that lead to the best possible outcomes.

Moebius: What can people do today to start practicing sustainability in agriculture?

RR: Ask the questions that sustain the quality of life you value. When buying produce, ask if what you are buying was grown as a polyculture—or was it grown as a monoculture, with far less resilience and likely pushing to collapse? Ask what does my community need to be in order to sustain what I value, and if I make this purchase, am I moving toward what my community has to be to sustain my values? Move beyond marketing terms like "organic"; investigate what purchases actually sustain your community. For example, my wife and I buy local grass-fed beef, but we raise our own chickens.

Moebius: Outside of the classroom, what do you recommend people read to gain perspective on current issues in agriculture?

RR: Read *Holistic Management* by Allan Savory, anything by Wendell Berry, David Suzuki, Bill McDonough, or Bill McKibben.

Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Sadie Johann, Winter 2010.